

CHAPTER 2

ASEAN: Challenges and Opportunities to Remain Relevant

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been at the center of interaction in Southeast Asia. After more than half a century of existence, ASEAN has been hailed for its role in facilitating and fostering regional and global peace. At the same time, more criticisms have been directed at ASEAN for its lack of ability to resolve some issues. Such criticisms become more apparent as the international context surrounding Southeast Asia has profoundly evolved since the end of Cold War, as there are now new threats, new institutions, new platforms of engagements, and new arenas for state competition and cooperation. Technological advancement has been influential in bringing about these changes.

The dynamics of great power rivalry are currently obscured by uncertainty as competition is increasing. The US-China decoupling accentuates as both countries are engaged in the race to project tougher stance to one another in the hope to look consistent in their competition amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and sensitivity brought by the pandemic may result to more provocations. Evolving security environment, uncertainty, recent developments in Afghanistan and the announcement of a new strategic alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have been significant to the dynamics and patterns of balance of power and major power competition between China and the United States in Southeast Asia and East Asia, which by implication also involves many other countries in the region.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has signaled global realignment of power and influence. One of the bases of the so-called realignment is the fact that the pandemic has forced narrower interaction patterns between countries. With the way the pandemic has developed, one of the first things we notice is the prompt retreat of countries to their national borders. The pandemic has damaged the flow of logistics and people's mobility and forced nations to isolate and pay attention to their own domestic conditions. This condition has since been named by observers of international relations as the so-called crisis of global leadership.

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This paper seeks to discuss whether or not ASEAN remains relevant in the midst of changing international security environment. How can Southeast Asian states maintain centrality and strategic autonomy in the context of U.S.-China rivalry? Does ASEAN play any role in assisting its member states to overcome challenges?

ASEAN: The History

Formed in 1967, ASEAN united Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, which sought to create a common front against the spread of communism and to promote political, economic, and social stability amid rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific. In the ASEAN Declaration, the founding fathers of ASEAN conveyed that the aims and purposes of ASEAN were for economic, social, cultural, technical, and educational cooperation and cooperation in other fields, and for the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter. It proclaimed ASEAN as representing “the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.”

In 1976, the members signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which emphasizes mutual respect and non-interference in other countries’ affairs. Parties to the TAC are guided by the following principles: (1) mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; (2) the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, or coercion; (2) non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; (3) settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means; (4) renunciation of the threat or use of force; and (5) effective cooperation among themselves.²

The TAC worked in the way that the ASEAN leaders had wanted – ASEAN countries enjoyed mutual peace, and they experienced economic development and growth. The accomplishment is more impressive when one compares the ASEAN region with the other part of Southeast Asia. When the Cold War ended globally and when at last peace came to Cambodia, a sea change occurred in the relationship between ASEAN members and non-members in Southeast Asia. In the eyes of war-torn countries in Indochina, by that time, it had become apparent that ASEAN was providing its members with political stability and economic prosperity. They began to express their desire to join ASEAN one after the other and the enlargement of ASEAN was no longer unrealistic. Facing the possibility of enlargement, ASEAN leaders assigned a new role to the TAC. While the TAC was a symbol of good neighborly relations between ASEAN countries, it also came to be regarded as the foundation

² Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, ASEAN, February 24, 1976, <https://asean-aipr.org/resources/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-tac/>.

of the institution's regional cooperation. In other words, the TAC began to be treated as a necessary condition for joining ASEAN and when Viet Nam expressed its desire to join, it was asked to accede to the TAC beforehand.

Following these efforts employing TAC, the membership doubled by the end of the 1990s, with the addition of Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). Now comprising of 10 countries, the group started to launch initiatives to boost regionalism. Faced with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which started in Thailand, ASEAN members pushed to further integrate their economies. The Chiang Mai Initiative, for instance, was a currency swap arrangement first initiated in 2000 between ASEAN members, China, Japan, and South Korea to provide financial support to one another and fight currency speculation.

In 2007, the ten members adopted the ASEAN Charter,³ which aims to transform ASEAN from a loose political association into an international organization that has a strong legal basis (legal personality), clear rules, and has an effective and efficient organizational structure. ASEAN defines the Charter as a constitutional document that provided the grouping with legal status and an institutional framework, which enshrines core principles and delineates requirements for membership, and laid out a blueprint for a community made up of three branches: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

In terms of organization, there has always been reluctance to create a larger, more formal institution. An adherence to the principles of consensus, non-interference, and the peaceful resolution of disputes is what is known as the ASEAN Way. Its many meetings and informal social gatherings are the way ASEAN functions to build interpersonal trust. Nonetheless, there has been great ambition to create a forum for dialogue by extending invitation to external actors to convene within its frameworks and there has been an effort to include them in these trust-building efforts.

In the 1970s, ASEAN started dialogues with external partners primarily on economic issues. Based on those experiences, ASEAN began to invite foreign ministers of Dialogue Partners to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) with a view to institutionalizing ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC). Thereafter in the 1990s, ASEAN launched another ASEAN-centered ministerial institution – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for dialogue and cooperation on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. The ARF was convened back-to-back with the AMM and the PMC. In addition to ASEAN and PMC members, countries such as China, Russia, and Vietnam (which was not yet a member of ASEAN), participated in the new institution.

³ ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2007), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

ASEAN succeeded in hosting an ASEAN-centered annual meeting at the summit level. In the latter half of 1990s, the ASEAN summit meeting began to be held every year – an official one every 3 years and informal ones in between. In early 1997, the Government of Japan proposed to have an annual Japan–ASEAN summit meeting. ASEAN’s response was a counter-proposal of summit meetings between ASEAN, on the one hand, and China, Japan, and Korea, on the other. The meeting, known as ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit, was at last held in late 1997.

Despite ASEAN’s relative lack of material power, it has been able to convene various meetings that discuss important issues pertinent to the region. ASEAN-tied processes have been central to create conducive room for dialogue. Such power is believed as an important essence of the so-called ASEAN centrality, which is examined further in the next section.

ASEAN Centrality

Various scholars have tried to define, both explicitly and implicitly, the meaning of ASEAN centrality. Acharya argues that ASEAN centrality is not an entirely novel or distinctive term. Rather, he says that “it is related to a number of similar concepts: ASEAN as the “leader,” the “driver,” the “architect,” the “institutional hub,” the “vanguard,” the “nucleus,” and the “fulcrum” of regional processes and institutional designs in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴ Richard Stubbs refers to term “leadership” to describe how ASEAN works to facilitate problem solving of regional issues, establish mechanisms for regional consultation, and shaping how regional issues are discussed.⁵ Mely Caballero-Anthony, using the social network analysis framework, defines ASEAN centrality as a situation where ASEAN is depicted by its being in between, being closely connected to and being in a number of networks in the wider East Asian institutional landscape and functions at the center and as a bridging node between various regional mechanisms.⁶

At the empirical level, ASEAN centrality is best illustrated by the existence of the various ASEAN-led institutions, and how ASEAN is able to set the agenda for these institutions. This entails, of course, then the relations between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners.

Since the 1970s, the ASEAN relationships with its dialogue partners have evolved to ensure the so-called ASEAN centrality throughout the entire process. It is quite interesting to see the evolution of the workings of ASEAN. As has been discussed in the previous section on ASEAN history, ASEAN

⁴ Amitav Acharya, “The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 39, no. 2 (August 2017): 273-279.

⁵ Richard Stubbs, “ASEAN’s leadership in East Asian region-building: Strength in weakness,” *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 4 (June 2014): 523-541.

⁶ Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Understanding ASEAN’s centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture,” *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 4 (June 2014): 563-584.

has opened up the TAC to its dialogue partners, and all of its dialogue partners have now become parties to TAC. ASEAN has also promoted its Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) to the five regional nuclear powers. Meanwhile, development cooperation has been increasingly used both by ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners to tap into each other's markets, to boost up investment flows and to enhance people-to-people relations, especially through tourism and other economic activities. More recently, ASEAN has agreed with Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea to establish the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).⁷

The underlying norm in engaging with Dialogue Partners today in ASEAN is generally described as “equal footing” instead of a donor-client relationship, despite the fact that there are some significant imbalances between capacities and resources. Cooperation is generally pursued based on joint decisions, joint planning, and joint implementation of activities. ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners are now using cost-sharing approaches in implementing projects. “Activities” and “projects” are now being set up with various workplans agreed by both parties, making external relations an important pillar for ASEAN day-to-day operations, especially since they include various events and meetings, from consultations to capacity building, as well as monitoring and evaluation. The central institutional and regional role played by ASEAN has invited interest from many extra-regional powers to formalize relations with ASEAN in the form of the ASEAN+1 mechanism as the way ASEAN describes and manages its external relations.

Such vast networks are the modality for ASEAN to claim centrality. As argued by Caballero-Anthony, despite its lack of material power, ASEAN's position as a node in a cluster of networks and the condition of “high betweenness” allow ASEAN to exercise influence in regional processes with the tacit acceptance of major powers.⁸

ASEAN centrality exists when Dialogue Partners acknowledge ASEAN and its ability to perform as convener and continue to engage ASEAN with the appreciation that ASEAN serves such a significant role/function in regional affairs. In other words, the acknowledgement of its Dialogue Partners, or any external powers, is not sufficient for ASEAN to maintain its centrality if the manner in which the external powers interact in the region does not reflect their appreciation of ASEAN's significant role. This has been one of the challenges facing ASEAN.

ASEAN: The Ongoing Challenges

ASEAN centrality has come under strain as various stakeholders of the region's evolving architecture have questioned ASEAN's ability and drive to manage the region effectively. The past two years have

⁷ RCEP was signed on November 15, 2020 and enters into force on January 1, 2022.

⁸ Caballero-Anthony, “Understanding ASEAN's centrality,” 563-584.

been particularly challenging for ASEAN. The spread of COVID-19, some episodes in the South China Sea, efforts/competition to secure vaccines, and the coup in Myanmar and its aftermath were dominant regional concerns. These were one shock after the other to the region, which naturally raises the question of the relevance of ASEAN in overcoming these challenges.

It is obvious that after half a decade of existence, ASEAN is facing a number of challenges, mostly related to the changing international security environment. Below is a discussion of some of them.

First, as discussed at the beginning of this paper, the increasing rivalry and strategic competition for influence in the region between the United States and China risks getting ASEAN tangled in a strategic tug-of-war that could destabilize the region. As the competition intensifies and tension increases, ASEAN's role as the "driver," the "architect," the "institutional hub," the "vanguard," the "nucleus," or the "fulcrum" as discussed in the previous section about ASEAN centrality, is rapidly shrinking.

Analysts are increasingly aware of ASEAN's ineptitude in effectively navigating the geopolitical challenge, and its declining relevance in mitigating the impacts of geopolitical competition between great powers. Mahbubani and Nair's article⁹ highlighted the indispensability of ASEAN's neutrality in the midst of U.S.-China rivalry, and suggested that ASEAN's architecture is under threat, as great powers try to instrumentalize ASEAN to project their own interests, especially towards the on-going South China Sea dispute. Paradoxically, such an approach will have disadvantages for both the United States and China. Only an independent and well-functioning ASEAN will serve to benefit the competing major powers in the long-term. Neutrality, which ASEAN has enshrined in its principles serves an indispensable role in providing a platform on which major powers can engage with lesser suspicions.

Most recently, this is indicated through the lack of communication and diplomatic consultations between Australia and ASEAN countries in regard to trilateral defense pact, AUKUS, before it was announced publicly. AUKUS was announced in September 2021 as a trilateral defense pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States for the Indo-Pacific region, which bears significance to the dynamics and patterns of balance of power and major power competition between China and the United States in Southeast Asia. The emergence of security alliances like AUKUS could further entrench ASEAN's position in mitigating the impacts of the competition of great powers in the region. ASEAN's diplomatic position as well as its mechanisms would be considered less and less relevant in managing the tensions arising from such rivalry. It is likely that any chance for an ASEAN role in tempering down the actions and behaviors of competing great powers in Southeast Asia will diminish.

⁹ Kishore Mahbubani and Amrita V. Nair, "ASEAN and Geopolitical Rivalries: Caught Between the U.S. and China," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 9 (Autumn 2017): 198-207.

Second, there are challenges stemming from political-security disputes. Internally, there are still border disputes and conflicts, illegal migration and ethnic crises. These problems are further complicated by the Myanmar crisis triggered by the military junta's coup in February 2021. As the Myanmar crisis remains unresolved, ASEAN continues to be burdened with the task of trying to stop ongoing violence against civilians by the Myanmar military, while at the same time answering to critics about ASEAN's irrelevance in managing serious issues in the region. At the end of April 2021, Min Aung Hlaing was invited to the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, while ASEAN obtained a commitment through the Five-Point Consensus that included mediation by a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair. Yet, there are challenges to implementing the Five-Point Consensus, and it remains to be seen whether ASEAN could ultimately fulfill its pledges in the consensus.

A report by CSIS Indonesia¹⁰ suggests that Myanmar is a critical test for ASEAN in which the regional organization needs to act cohesively, given the fact that the crisis is now considered both a regional and international concern. The regional impact has notably been towards Southeast Asia's democratization process. This crisis has also called into question ASEAN's credibility in terms of its ability to solve a crisis in its own region. When Myanmar's army refused to allow ASEAN's special envoy to "meet with all parties concerned" in Myanmar, members of Myanmar's military were then excluded from ASEAN summit meetings. There has been a tussle between the Myanmar military government and the National Unity Government to participate in ASEAN meetings. ASEAN's principles of consensus and non-interference have become the main point of concern, as it is unclear whether consensus can be reached regarding attendance by the country's political representatives.

There are also still serious challenges concerning the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and other concerns regarding ASEAN's role and relevance in the region and beyond. On the South China Sea disputes, the COVID-19 pandemic has had impacts in at least three different ways. The first impact is on the postponement of Code of Conduct negotiations, which have been halted as international travels and onsite meetings are becoming increasingly difficult to do. As the negotiations involve sensitive issues, it is understood that countries are reluctant to meet virtually. The second impact is on the security situation in the area, as Southeast Asian countries are having to reduce their defense spending, thus unable to conduct regular patrol. There have been a number of incidents involving China Coast Guard in various parts of the South China Sea. The third impact is on the relations between China and individual Southeast Asian countries. It has been very apparent that the pandemic has driven Southeast Asian countries to seek stronger ties with China. During most of 2020 and 2021, many countries relied on China for medical equipment, and subsequently for vaccine procurement. In late 2021 and in 2022, it is likely that Southeast Asian countries continue to seek stronger ties with China to kickstart their post-pandemic economic recoveries.

¹⁰ Naifa Rizani Lardo, "Myanmar Crisis and the Future of ASEAN," (CSIS Policy Brief, CSIS Indonesia, Jakarta, December 2021), <https://csis.or.id/publications/myanmar-crisis-and-the-future-of-asean>.

Third, there are also problems related to ASEAN unity. ASEAN countries tend to have divergent interests and priorities, with each member having its own challenges, both domestically and in terms of foreign relations. This has been apparent in various issues, most notably in the South China Sea disputes,¹¹ while other bilateral border disputes and internal security challenges also have demonstrated ASEAN's fragility, revealing how misunderstandings can quickly flare into confrontations. More recently, stark differences in each state's response during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as they scrambled to manage the outbreak also highlighted such division.¹² Indonesia has called for "ASEAN Unity amid challenges,"¹³ which is a reflection of the unresolved problem.

Whither ASEAN's Future?

When the first casualty of the demonstrations in Myanmar happened in early 2021, some people were predicting the demise of ASEAN. ASEAN was clearly rattled, witnessing the violence that took place right under its nose, violating the principles adhered to in the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights (2012). As violence by the Myanmar military became more widespread, more and more criticisms have been directed towards ASEAN – some justified, while some unfair.

An institution can only do so much as the rules of the game allows; thus, criticisms saying that "ASEAN has failed" are excessive.¹⁴ It must be acknowledged that there have always been high expectations of ASEAN, while the process of institution building has been relatively slow. ASEAN has gone through various phases of existence and development since its establishment, and it has seen much domestic and regional turmoil – in some crises, it plays a worthy role, and in others ASEAN has sadly turned a blind eye. Criticisms towards its "unity" and "centrality" regularly come from both within the region and outside of the region. But ASEAN has thus prevailed as a regional institution and a convening power for the external partners.

CSIS in Jakarta, Indonesia, conducted a global expert survey through an online platform from June 10 to July 14, 2020.¹⁵ The survey invited responses from academics, think-tankers, and professionals with expertise on strategic issues, economics, and international relations from across the globe. One

¹¹ When ASEAN failed to reach an agreement in 2012 on how to deal with China's claims on disputed territory in the South China Sea, it was the first time ASEAN ended a meeting without issuing a joint statement in its history. This portrayed the serious problems of ASEAN (dis)unity. Linh Tong, "The ASEAN Crisis, Part 1: Why the South China Sea Is a Critical Test," *The Diplomat*, December 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/the-asean-crisis-part-1-why-the-south-china-sea-is-a-critical-test/>.

¹² Editorial, "Whither ASEAN Unity?," *The Jakarta Post*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/04/14/whither-asean-unity.html>.

¹³ Aria Cindyara & Suharto, "Indonesia calls for ASEAN Unity Amid Challenges," *Antara*, January 6, 2021, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/208297/indonesia-calls-for-asean-unity-amid-challenges>.

¹⁴ Shafiah F. Muhibat, "Embracing Change to Stay Resilient," *ASEAN Focus*, March 2021, 4-5, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ASEANFocus-March-2021.pdf>.

¹⁵ Philips J. Vermonte and others, *CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020: Global and Regional Dynamics After COVID-19*, (Jakarta: CSIS Indonesia, 2021), <https://csis.or.id/publications/csis-global-expert-survey-2020-global-and-regional-dynamics-after-covid-19>.

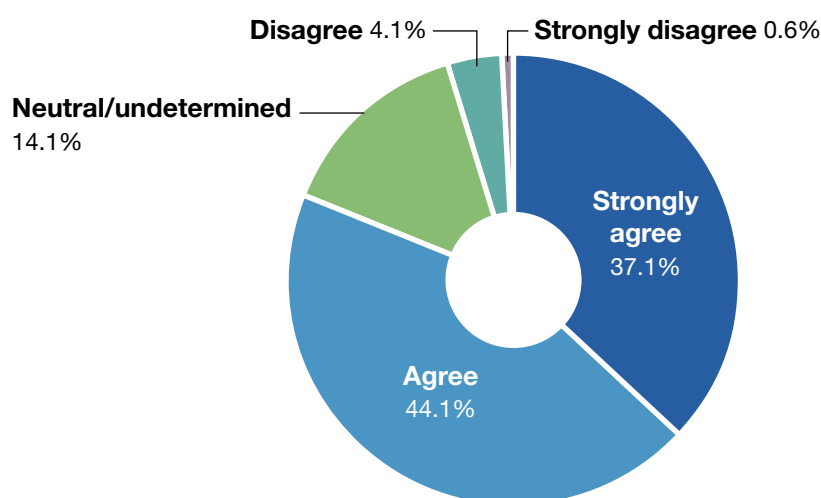
of the issues taken up by the survey was ASEAN, its relevance, and how it is perceived by experts both within the region and globally.

Respondents of the survey were asked how they would describe the potential global leadership of the following international organizations in a post-COVID-19 global order, and it is apparent that there is optimism, including hopefulness of the role or leadership of ASEAN and its institutions (see Table 1). Even more so, Figure 1 shows the expectation towards ASEAN and its role in the region. Note that 44.1 percent of respondents agree that ASEAN should remain central in regional architecture and governance in the Indo-Pacific region. As much as 37.1 percent of the respondents strongly agree that ASEAN could play a central role in the region. Only less than 5 percent of them think ASEAN has no role to play in regional architecture and governance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Table 1. Result from CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020: How would you describe the potential global leadership of the following international organizations in a post-COVID-19 global order?

Organization	Very positive	Positive	Neutral/undetermined	Negative	Very negative
United Nations and its specialized agencies	17.9	44.0	29.8	8.3	0.0
IMF and the World Bank	13.6	51.5	29.6	5.3	0.0
European Union	11.8	50.3	30.8	5.9	1.2
G-20	9.5	41.4	42.0	5.9	1.2
ASEAN and its institutions	8.9	53.3	30.8	5.9	1.2
G-7	5.4	29.2	50.0	13.1	2.4

Source: Vermonte and others, *CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020*.

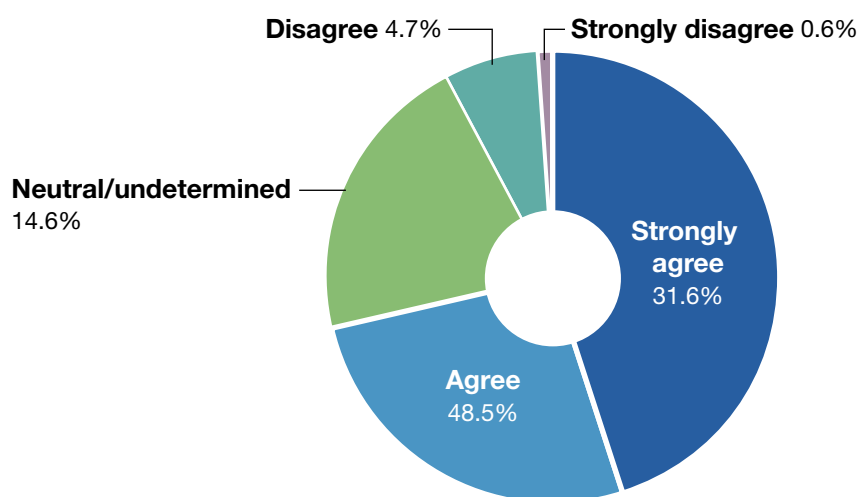


Source: Vermonte and others, *CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020*.

Figure 1-1. Result from CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020: Do you agree that ASEAN should remain central in regional architecture and governance in the Indo-Pacific region?

Even though the majority of respondents still believe in the important role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region, most of them also think that ASEAN must be reformed to deal with a post-COVID-19 regional order (see Figure 2). Almost 80 percent of the respondents agree that ASEAN should be reformed. This is a very important point. ASEAN has weaknesses — the problem is, these weaknesses are mostly embedded in the underlying principles of ASEAN. Two notable weaknesses of ASEAN are in the decision making process and in the institutional design.

Getting to a consensus on sensitive issues has always been a problem, and in some important cases there is apparent frustration in getting around this hindrance. Countries wanting to make innovative efforts may be left frustrated by constraints on doing so. Thus, reform should be an intrinsic part of ASEAN's future.



Source: Vermonte and others, *CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020*

Figure 2. Result from CSIS Global Expert Survey 2020: Do you think ASEAN should be reformed to deal with a post-COVID-19 regional order?

Understanding that there is still high expectation for ASEAN to play a greater role in the future amidst ongoing challenges and criticism, there is then the question of ASEAN's place in the greater region outside of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia has been on the receiving end of competing narratives on the Indo-Pacific driven by major actors. The concern, however, is that the competing narratives do not really serve Southeast Asia's interests yet massively impact the region.¹⁶

¹⁶ I have discussed this elsewhere. See Shafiah F. Muhibat, "Indonesia and Indo-Pacific: Seeking the Proper Response to Great Power Politics," (Berlin: SWP Working Paper, Research Division Asia / BCAS 2019, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2019), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/BCAS_2019_Muhibat_Indonesia_and_Indo-Pacific.pdf.

The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was adopted at the ASEAN Summit on June 23, 2019. It is comprised of four key elements: the integration of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, the promotion of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry, development and prosperity of all, the importance of the maritime domain in the regional architecture, and proposes areas of collaboration including maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and the economy.

In AOIP, the way regional architecture is imagined is portrayed through concepts such as “inclusive,” “inclusivity,” “collective leadership,” “ballast for the current dynamism,” “inclusiveness” — an effort to “liberate” ASEAN from the views of competing great powers. AOIP, to some extent, is also seen as an effort to connect the dots and empower other potential partners. As this is a regional document, it falls on ASEAN to also recognize the presence of non-ASEAN-led mechanisms and non-ASEAN countries through a region-to-region approach. This is manifested in the allusion to AOIP’s “cooperation with other regional and sub-regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.”

Though applauded as an important breakthrough, AOIP also disappoints many of those who had high expectations of what AOIP should be. Now, almost three years (as of time of writing) after its conception, the promotion of AOIP is no longer holds the grandeur it once had. Then, from here, where does ASEAN go with regards to Indo-Pacific? A number of suggestions have been made by experts, and below is a summary of some that are very useful.

First, an ASEAN vision should not only reconcile all competing visions of regional order but also ensure the relevance and centrality of ASEAN as a manager of regional order. For this, ASEAN must ensure unity, while at the same time continue the necessary institutional reform.

Second, identification upon the existing and the forthcoming hotspots are necessary before being able to bridge differences in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes, among others the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Korean Peninsula. The issues vary, ranging from traditional challenges — building overseas military bases, a potential regional submarine race, nuclear warheads, increasing freedom of navigation operations by great powers — to non-traditional ones.

Third, ASEAN needs to develop a strategy to resist the temptation and the pressure to choose one of the great powers, while at the same time avoid excessive dependence on a major power. Taking sides means risking regional stability; It is imperative for ASEAN to continue building a regional resilience.

Concluding Notes

ASEAN’s efforts to play a role in the Indo-Pacific portrays its ambition for a region with a stable order to maintain the life and growth of each state and its people, as well as to ensure that each state’s

borders and sovereign rights are respected by others. This could be best understood as a small/middle power diplomacy amidst great power rivalry and competing Indo-Pacific concepts/strategies. Its manifestation could be seen in at least the following three ways: gathering fellow smaller regional countries to agree upon one collective voice in dealing with greater powers; inviting other great powers to rebalance the presence of the existing great powers, and extensively binding all great powers with regional instruments and mechanisms. Therefore, it is necessary for ASEAN to set the rules of the game, but it would be much more sufficient if ASEAN Dialogue Partners also provided support and served as the driving force — hence back to the matter of ASEAN centrality.

This then raises the question: Is ASEAN’s current stature sufficient to allow Southeast Asia to adapt to current international and regional challenges? The answer is “no.” The Indo-Pacific is important, and ASEAN collectively made the right move to shift focus to the larger Indo-Pacific. However, ASEAN will need a more comprehensive and innovative strategy to face the current challenges, as the Indo-Pacific in 2022 is a different arena for state competition and cooperation. It is critical for ASEAN to tell the major powers not to formulate their policy towards Southeast Asia on the basis of strategic rivalry between themselves. Their relations with Southeast Asia should be based on Southeast Asia. Treating Southeast Asia as a battleground for influence and trying to force regional countries to take sides would not be in anyone’s interest. As for individual Southeast Asian states’ intricate relations with both China and the United States, given their approach of ambivalence at the bilateral level, they can still benefit from using ASEAN’s impartial position as their leverage, particularly to conduct their relations with competing major powers.¹⁷

The post-pandemic Indo-Pacific might require ASEAN to make some adjustments. It has been predicted that ASEAN’s post-pandemic future will be shaped by greater regional trade and integration, shifts in global manufacturing supply chains, and acceleration in digitalization, while market activity will be driven by the disruption caused by new technologies and the increasing focus on sustainability.¹⁸ At the same time, unresolved political-security problems will decide ASEAN’s future.¹⁹

Challenges are plenty – some are unresolved for decades. Yet, high expectations show that there are opportunities for ASEAN to be relevant in the future, at least through its convening role in the Indo-Pacific region. Historically, ASEAN has been able to minimize interstate conflict because of an adherence to the principles of consensus, non-interference, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. ASEAN’s practice of organizing a large number of meetings builds interpersonal trust, which has thus far replaced formal legal mechanisms. However, this may no longer be sufficient going forward, as

¹⁷ Mahbubani and Nair, “ASEAN and Geopolitical Rivalries,” 198-207.

¹⁸ Bryan Yeong, “Looking at ASEAN’s post-pandemic future,” *Eastspring Investments*, August 2021, <https://www.eastspring.com/insights/thought-leadership/looking-at-asean-s-post-pandemic-future>.

¹⁹ Evan A. Laksmiana, “ASEAN’s Future Will Be Decided in Myanmar,” *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/21/asean-myanmar-brunei-southeast-asia-special-envoy-junta-humanitarian-aid-aha-center/>.

there is pressure on ASEAN to reform its structure and culture, presented by the changing security dynamic and the influence of external actors in the region. This is one aspect that ASEAN leaders must carefully consider if they are serious about maintaining relevance.